

Orderliness in Japanese Society

By Gang Ye

TO name one thing in Japan that impresses Chinese visitors most, I guess many would say: orderliness. The universal respect for the public order and established rules, together with Shinkansen bullet trains, professional sumo, expensive living costs and other novelties, formed my first impression of the archipelago in 1989 and continued to inspire me as I worked here as a correspondent.

Although China has become more modernized in recent years, Chinese tourists, government officials and businesspersons to Japan still talk admiringly about how the Japanese people line up, cross a street only when the light is green and obey the laws – somewhat too rigidly.

■ Easily Bound by a Line

Order is as crucial to a society as air is to a human body. In August 2005, I came across a news story that more than 5,500 people rushed to buy used notebook computers at \$50 (about ¥6,600 then) each in the US state of Virginia and a violent stampede followed. More than a dozen people were injured and many more were scared.

Stories like that are familiar in a number of developing countries although they seem unusual in the affluent United States. In some Chinese cities, fighting for bargains is as common as vying for place in a crowded bus. There have been reports of chaos during the sale of television sets, or even flour, when priced way below average during special promotions.

Nevertheless, such scenes would be rare in Japan. One of the senior reporters in the Tokyo Bureau of Xinhua News Agency told me that Japanese people can be “bound” simply by a line or a band when they line up for

tickets or bargain shopping, where metal railings would be necessary in China to keep order. While waiting in line, I was often asked by late-comers where the end of the line was for them to stand.

An impressive example was the sale of “one-yen computers” in 1999 during my second assignment as a correspondent in Tokyo. Selling a computer worth around ¥80,000 at ¥1 is of course a sales strategy for dramatic advertising purposes. I doubted if the ploy would work, as in my mind crowds of jostling buyers would inevitably lead to a mess.

It turned out that my concerns were unnecessary. In the coldest time of the year, several dozen people who lined up waited in the open air for three days and nights in perfect order, most of them obviously students with few sources of income. One even brought a tent with him. Every two hours, some volunteers would stand out to call the roll, so as to avoid line-jumping or halfway absence. Exhausted as they were after the long wait, they succeeded in purchasing the one-yen computers, in perfect order.

It is therefore not hard to conclude that the right you obtained in a waiting line is always respected in Japan.

■ Equality on the Road

Obedience and maintenance of order seems to be in the Japanese blood. Be it top officials or common folks, everyone feels responsible for keeping the order. A society composed of such individuals would naturally be efficient.

While attending the 130th anniversary ceremony of the Nihon Keizai Shimbun newspaper (called Nikkei for short) on Dec. 1, I saw Prime Minister Abe Shinzo walking out of the hotel lobby and getting into his car while a flurry of sedans were busy loading and



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unloading passengers at the entrance.

Like other vehicles, the prime minister's car waited for a while to leave instead of being given priority. The scene somewhat touched me as traffic control, police cars and sirens are often seen in some other countries when vehicles carrying top officials pass by.

I have long been impressed by the traffic efficiency in this densely populated country. Underlying the general respect of law and order is the Japanese citizens' sense of equality. As every vehicle is equal before the law, traffic congestions can be easily resolved and accident rates stay low.

As Beijing, Shanghai and other Chinese cities are learning traffic management from Japan, it is advisable that lessons should not be limited to the Japanese experience in establishing traffic laws and constructing roads. The attitude of Japanese people toward rule and order is also essential in building a harmonious road environment.



Illustration: Kato Susumu

Disorder in Parliament

Well organized and systemically arranged as the Japanese society is, there still are places where order sometimes seems absent. In June 2004, before the difficult passage of a contentious pension bill, a show of angry debates, scuffles and various delaying tactics was staged in parliament.

To delay the vote of the bill, opposition lawmakers, led by members of the Democratic Party of Japan, practiced the “ox walk” tactic, i.e. walking slowly or standing still for a while on the way to the podium to cast their ballots. Lengthy speeches were also delivered to drag out the session in an effort to kill the unpopular bill. At one point, a brawl erupted and security guards had to separate the lawmakers as they shoved each other.

After more than 18 hours of delay in the voting, the bill finally passed. Such fuss has been staged from time to time

in the Japanese parliament. About a dozen years ago, the opposition blocked the deliberation of a UN peacekeeping cooperation bill in parliament for more than 13 hours using the time-honored “ox walk.”

The existence of such political tactics and such a process of political decision-making are somewhat incomprehensible to me. Should tax money be wasted in these tussles and ox walks?

After staying in Japan for more than 10 years, I noticed that disorder in the elite world hardly affects order in the general public. During the last decade of the 20th century, the economically depressed country went through nine prime ministers without any turmoil.

Whatever chaos erupts in parliament, the Japanese society still runs its own orderly course. Salarymen and office ladies go to work as punctually as ever; housewives tend their daily routines and go shopping to relax without interrup-

tion. Faddish places such as Shibuya are still filled with trendy boys and girls...

On the other hand, most people would comply with laws and rules once they are established, no matter how much they had resisted in the first place. An example is the consumer tax law, which rammed through parliament after sizzling debates between the ruling and opposition parties. Massive protests were also launched outside the parliament during deliberation. However, once the bill became law, nobody refuses to pay the consumer tax.

Law and order are everywhere in a mature society like Japan. It is due to the public respect for law and order that a nation can boast itself as a safe and orderly place. **J.S**

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